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Dissertationes

The Anti-Arian Theology of the Council of Nicea of 325

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Abstract

This study is concerned with the period when the Church was confronted with the necessity to define the precise doctrine of the nature of the Son in the context of his relationship with the Father. The Church celebrated the first ecumenical council designed to resolve the controversy that was provoked by the conflicting theological pronouncements on this issue between Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, and Arius. Two major issues are discussed in this article. The first deals with the theology of Arius that gave rise to the crisis in the local Church of Alexandria at first and then eventually spread to the whole of Christendom as more ecclesiastics involved themselves in the theological discourse. The second appertains to the Council of Nicea and its produced confession. The said council was convoked by the authority of the emperor in response to the theological crisis that was generated in the altercation between Arius and his bishop. These two issues will be prefaced by a brief narrative account that will locate the controversy and the personalities involved in history.

Introduction

In the fourth century, the Church was shaken by the theological crisis of empire-wide magnitude so much so that the recently converted emperor, acknowledging it to be his responsibility to his newfound religion to preserve the unity of the people under one God and protect the purity of faith and right worship, convened the first ecumenical council to resolve the theological issue to restore unity in the Church. This is what is known to modern scholars of ancient church history as the Arian crisis. This article will revisit the said Arian crisis and the Church's dogmatic response that was reached at the council of Nicea. The examination of the proposed topic will be developed discussing progressively three themes. A brief inquiry about the cause that precipitated the emergence of this divisive issue in the Church and its development into a full-blown crisis to merit the attention of the im-

perial government will be surveyed to historically situate the problem. The second theme that is explored in this work is the exposition of the thought of Arius. This will set the stage for the third theme to be investigated, which is the specification of the theology of the council that was convoked to address the Arian issue. The theology that is embodied in the creed of the Council of Nicea is considered in this work from a very specific point of view, that is, as an anti-Arian polemic to arrest and clarify the confusion generated by the Arian view about the nature of the Son of God.

The Emergence and Development of the Arian conflict

The circumstances surrounding the beginning of the Arian crisis are somewhat fuzzy. Some maintain that it was Arius's questionable preaching that started the controversy as it eventually caught the attention of the Alexandrian pontiff who reprimanded him for holding such a view.¹ However, it was more likely that Alexander's zeal, brought about by his sense of pastoral duty to unite his clergy under a uniform doctrine of God, that prompted Arius to assert his own view, having perceived the bishop's teaching as

¹ Sozomen and Theodoret are the principal sources of this position. Sozomen presents Arius as the one who provoked Alexander and therefore the originator of the disputations. This position may not, however, be uncritically accepted. Sozomen has an obvious prejudice against Arius and wanted to picture him as someone who introduced an innovation in the Church, claiming that such doctrine had never been upheld by anyone and that this was the first time that it was heard in the Church (*HE* I,15; NPNF 2,242). Sozomen would want his readers to believe that there already existed an established orthodox teaching at that time and that the innovation which, he claims, Arius had introduced is a deviation from this. The same prejudiced assessment of Arius is found in the writings of Theodoret (*HE* I,1; NPNF 3,33), who painted a picture of the Church as peaceful and living in harmony only to be disrupted by the devil-inspired Arius who was "persuaded... to oppose the apostolical doctrine of Alexander." His religious propaganda requires that Arius, as the author of the controversy, be understood as the agitator against peace. The other important ancient historian, Socrates (*HE*, I,5-6; NPNF 2,3), accounts that the origin of the controversy engendered from the casual meeting of Alexander of Alexandria with his presbyters. The bishop, prompted by his perceived episcopal duty, gathered his clergy where he expounded the mystery of the unity of the Trinity, which Arius has received negatively, interpreting it as a restatement of the heresy of Sabellius. This originally local clash of views between the bishop and his presbyter spread outside Egypt as other ecclesiastics became involved, aligning themselves with either one or the other position.

going against his basic religious conviction.² The first confrontation between Alexander and Arius most probably occurred around the year 320.³

Alexander, then, confronted by the view of Arius that proclaimed a difference in substance and subordinated the Son to the Father, judged it appropriate to convene a local council of bishops to make the aforementioned presbyter adhere to the received tradition of the Church of Alexandria.⁴ Arius was condemned and withdrawn from ecclesiastical communion when he refused to be persuaded into compliance to the doctrine of God specified by the synod. It is possible that the letter of Arius to Alexander, drafted in collaboration with his trusted allies and explaining his theological position, was submitted in this synod to demonstrate their orthodoxy.⁵ The excommuni-

² The emperor Constantine, in his letter to Alexander and Arius, mentions that Alexander obliged his presbyters to explain “a certain inexplicable passage of the written Word.” SOCRATES, *HE* I,7 (NPNF 2,6).

³ Scholars have presented two possible dates for the first confrontation between Alexander and Arius, namely, the year 318 (Cf. R.P.C. HANSON, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God, The Arian controversy 318-381* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 131) and 320/321 (M. SIMONETTI, *La Crisi Ariana nel IV Secolo* (Roma: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1975), 26). I am more inclined to take the latter option inasmuch as the duration of seven years before the controversy developed and exploded into a full-blown crisis in the Church, requiring the celebration of the general council, accorded by 318 option is too long given the list of the known events that preceded it. On the other hand, 320/321, inclusive of the almost two years interval yielded by the civil war, reasonably encloses the recorded chronology of events within the span of five years. However, M. Simonetti, despite making the proposal of 320, makes a sober note that because of the absence of solid textual evidence it is impossible to determine the exact date of the beginning of the controversy (Ibid., 26, n.1).

⁴ Theodoret wrote that Alexander was at first tolerant of the theological views of Arius and was, initially, not sure of which view to take sides on – whether the Arian that takes the Son as a creature, or the anti-Arian view that proclaims the equal and coeternal status of the Son with the Father. Only later did Alexander make up his mind and start to support the anti-Arian view (*HE* I,1; NPNF 3,34). This position, however, does not correspond to the evidence that we have. As far as we know, Alexander had always been a staunch supporter of the Origenist view of the eternal generation of the Son. He firmly believed, “He is Father from the continual presence of the Son, on account of whom he is called Father.” (*Ep.ad Alex.Alex.*; THEODORET, *HE* I,4,26; NPNF 3,37).

⁵ J. BEHR, *Formation of the Christian Theology, The Nicene Faith*, Vol. 2, Part 1 (New York: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 2004), 64.

cated presbyter together with his companions sought refuge from ecclesiastical leaders outside Egypt who were sympathetic to his cause. They first went to Palestine where they were welcomed and their appeal for support generated a positive response. The Palestinians convoked a local synod in 321⁶ which ordained that Arius and his supporters be reinstated to their former status even as it enjoined them to reconcile with and submit to the authority of the bishop of Alexandria.⁷ The Palestinians tried to strike the middle ground of the issue at hand, ruling in favor of Arius, while acknowledging the authority of Alexander. With this strategy, they hoped that Alexander would soften his policy with respect to the case of Arius.

Evidently, the desired objective of the Palestinian synod to put a stop to Alexander's offensive against Arius did not come to fruition. It thus motivated Arius to seek a more formidable source of support. Arius, then, perhaps upon the suggestion of the Palestinian bishops, went to solicit the help of the politically connected Eusebius of Nicomedia, whom he acknowledged in his missive as a fellow follower of Lucian of Antioch. In his letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, he impudently denounced the unjust treatment he had received from the bishop of Alexandria for teaching no less than the truth, which, he declared, the Nicomedian bishop also upheld. This is the view that "the Son has a beginning, but that God is without beginning (ἀρχὴν ἔχει ὁ υἱὸς, ὁ δὲ Θεὸς ἀναρχὸς ἐστίν)." ⁸ The bishop of Nicomedia, upon the receipt of the letter, became an instant supporter of Arius and did not lose time in mustering all the help he could give to a fellow student of Lucian. However, while Eusebius immediately committed himself to rally behind Arius, the other bishops of the region, probably because they had no document upon which to base their decision of support, sensibly expressed reservation on sustaining the cause of Arius.⁹ They needed an assurance be-

⁶ See R. WILLIAMS, *Arius, Heresy and Tradition*, Revised Edition (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 48-61.

⁷ SOZOMEN, *HE* I,15 (NPNF 2,251).

⁸ ARIUS, *Ep.ad Eus.* (THEODORET, *HE* I,5,4; GCS NF5,27; NPNF 3,41).

⁹ Cf. R. WILLIAMS, *Arius*, 64ff. Accordingly, the point of issue might have been Arius's doctrine of the unknowability of the Father. The bishops of Bithynia were more

fore making a commitment of support that Arius's belief was, indeed, compatible with theirs. Hence, arose the need for Arius to write down a summary of his doctrine when he, as reported by Athanasius in *De synodis*, was in the presence of Eusebius and his fellows.¹⁰ The work that resulted from this was the notorious *Thalia*.

The advance of the theological controversy between the partisans of Arius on the one side and Alexander on the other was decelerated, if not briefly arrested, when the relationship between Constantine and Licinius turned inimical in late 322 or early 323.¹¹ Licinius promulgated repressive measures that targeted the Christians who were loyal to Constantine,¹² invalidating all the rights and privileges previously granted to Christians by Constantine, including the prohibition imposed upon the bishops to travel and gather in an assembly. This new political situation temporarily interrupted the advance of the Arian conflict for a couple of years until the final defeat of Licinius in September of 324 in Byzantium.¹³ Constantine's triumph over the eastern emperor made possible again the mobility and assembly of bishops, restored with their previous rights and privileges, to discuss matters of doctrine. The conclusion of the political battle paved the way for the ecclesiastical battle between the pro and anti-Arian allegiances to recommence.

inclined to the idea of the possibility of knowledge about God. Arius might have satisfied this reservation of the bishops when, in the *Thalia*, he promoted *apophatic* attitude as regards the knowledge of God. Arius did not deny the possibility of revelation but he conceded that what we have is only a negative knowledge about God.

¹⁰ ATHANASIUS, *De syn.* 15 (NPNF 4,457).

¹¹ R.P.C. HANSON, *Search*, 134.

¹² C.M. ODAHL, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 2nd Edition (New York: Routledge, 2004), 174. Licinius tried to remove any Christian from a position of power, especially those in military service. In this precarious time, when war with a Christian emperor was ominous, he could only rely on non-Christian soldiers and officials. He also knew too well that Christians would remain in his empire and so he wisely ruled to minimize their mobility and their chance to gather which were opportunities to consolidate their unity and discuss among themselves issues of great importance, both ecclesiastical and political. This new political order had repercussions in the subject matter of our study.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 181.

On its resumption in 324 the briefly halted theological controversy became even more intense. On the part of the supporters of Arius, they renewed their attack on Alexander with a provincial council convened and presided over by no less than Eusebius of Nicomedia.¹⁴ The encyclical letter *henos somatos*, attributed to Alexander, was most likely written as a counter reaction to this Bithynian pro-Arian council.¹⁵ The document makes disapproving comments in reference to the activities of the Nicomedian bishop.¹⁶ Moreover, the already volatile situation became even more critical that it merited the concern of the emperor, as the debate was no longer confined among Church leaders, inasmuch as the lay congregation this time took a more active interest in it and were as divided in their opinion on the matter as their pastors.¹⁷ The victorious emperor, stunned to discover the fragmented situation of the Church in the East, immediately committed himself to the quick resolution of the crisis, issuing a letter to both Alexander and Arius, whose differences in opinion, he was informed, had caused the problem in the Church.¹⁸

Constantine sent Ossius as his official representative to deal with the chaotic situation of the Alexandrian Church. Ossius's journey to Alexandria took place at the beginning of the year 325.¹⁹ In Alexandria, he convened a local synod of bishops. Coming out of this mission, Ossius acquired

¹⁴ R. WILLIAMS, *Arius*, 57.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁶ "But since Eusebius, now in Nicomedia, thinks that the affairs of the Church are under his control because, forsooth, he deserted his charge at Berytus and assumed authority over the Church at Nicomedia with impunity, and has put himself at the head of these apostates, daring even to send commendatory letters in all directions concerning them, if by any means he might inveigle some of the ignorant into this most impious and antichristian heresy, I felt imperatively called on to be silent no longer, knowing what is written in the law, but to inform you of all of these things, that you might understand both who the apostates are, and also the contemptible character of their heresy, and pay no attention to anything that Eusebius should write to you." *Ep. ency.* (SOCRATES, *HE* I,4,6; GCS NF4,7; NPNF 2,3).

¹⁷ SOCRAATES, *HE* I,8,1 (NPNF 2,6-7).

¹⁸ Cf. CONSTANTINE, *Ep. ad Alex. et Ar.* (SOCRATES, *HE* I,7,3-20; NPNF 2,6-7).

¹⁹ R.P.C. HANSON, *Search*, 149.

a more nuanced knowledge of the controversy. Moreover, he was convinced by Alexander to take his side on the matter. Before returning to the emperor to personally file his report on the outcome of his mission, his presence was required at Antioch as the congregation there had not yet elected a successor of Philogonius, who died in December of the previous year.²⁰ Ossius thus found himself heading towards the direction of the Asian city and presiding over a council of around 50 bishops that met to elect and consecrate its new pastor, in the person of Eustathius.²¹

The synod did not confine its affair to the selection of the new bishop. It also dealt with the current question on the belief in the Son of God. It issued a creed that mirrored the theology of Alexander of Alexandria. Three bishops who refused to sign the creedal document were provisionally excommunicated, giving them time to rethink their position pending the celebration of the “great and priestly synod”²² to be convened in Ancyra. The suggestion of convening the great council in Ancyra might have come from the anti-Arian group, knowing that its bishop, Marcellus of Ancyra, was an ardent opponent of the Arian teaching. But the emperor who was then already cognizant of the seriousness of the situation, suspecting that Ancyra might not be a level playing field for the parties concerned, decided to transfer it to a place near his residence so that he, too, could participate and monitor its development.²³

²⁰ For a conjecture that places the death of Philogonius one year earlier, that is, December 323, see R.W. BURGESS, *Studies in Eusebian and Post-Eusebian Chronography* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999), 182-184.

²¹ The authenticity of this synod is validated by the discovery of its account in syriac version retro-translated into Greek by Schwartz in 1905.

²² Ibid.

²³ The concern shown by the emperor could be better understood if taken in conjunction with the experience that he had in the West regarding the Donatist controversy. That controversy did not only divide the church of Africa but also caused disturbance to the conduct of social life. The schismatics undermined the authority of the ecclesiastical council that was convened, arguing that it unfairly prejudiced their cause. Thus, they appealed for support to the emperor to repeal its decision. The emperor found out the treachery of the group and ruled against them (C.M. ODAHL, *Constantine*, 129-141). He would not want the same to happen with this new controversy in the Church. He would give the

The Theology of Arius

In order to reconstruct his thought, there exist, at least, the letters of Arius to Alexander of Alexandria, Eusebius of Nicomedia and Constantine, and the fragments of his work, the *Thalia*, reported by Athanasius in his work. As regards the major dogmatic work of Arius, the *Thalia*, two fragments have come to us via the works of Athanasius – one in *Orationes contra Arianos* I.5-6 and another in *De synodis* 15. I will give preference to the latter version in that it is already established in recent scholarship that such is more faithful to the teaching of Arius, being a product of editorial work by an unknown Arian sympathizer, than the one found in the *Orationes contra Arianos*, which is a reductive summary of Arius's teaching by Athanasius.²⁴

Arius was plainly confessing what he believed as the revealed doctrine of God. It consists in the affirmation of the absolute singularity of the

great council the force of an imperial sanction with no less than his actual participation in the discussion and his concurrence to its decisions. In this way, the decisions arrived at by the council would be identified closely with the requirements of the emperor himself. Likewise, the prospect of petitioning the emperor, as a higher authority, to dismiss the adjudication of the council on the issue would be ruled out. But again, the Arian supporters were too sharp not to realize that the primary agenda of Constantine was social unity and not the intricacies of theology. They would use this insight to their advantage. They would make half-true statements about their faith-declarations, enough to make the emperor believe their orthodoxy and to consequently endorse their reinstatement.

²⁴ That the piece reproduced in *Apologia contra Arianos* is a reductive representation of Arius's doctrine by Athanasius himself helps to explain why no positive statements about the Son are included in the texts. Such is the polemical intention of Athanasius, to characterize Arius as teaching that the Son is on the same level with creatures, probably to excite repulsion from those who accord the Son great reverence. This is emphasized in the text through the repeated use of the expression "as others" when referring to the Son, with the word "others" signifying the rest of creatures. On the other hand, the fragment quoted in the *De synodis*, known as the *Blasphemies*, as Athanasius entitled it, is from an unknown follower of Arius who has reworked and paraphrased the doctrine of the *Thalia* to offer a more faithful production of the essential teaching of Arius. C. KANNENGISSER, "The Blasphemies of Arius: Athanasius of Alexandria's *De synodis* 15", in R. GREGG (ed.), *Arianism, Historical and Theological Assessments* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 75.

Between the two versions, scholars confer more weight on the testimony of the *Blasphemies* judging it as closer to the original thought of the heresiarch than the reconstruction provided by Athanasius in *Orationes contra Arianos*.

Father, first and foremost his being ingenerate, against those who unduly glorify the status of the Logos, by putting the Logos on the same plane with the Father. Such intention is not hard to detect in the extant works of Arius where the transcendence of the Father, in contrast to the contingency of the Son in God's will, is always emphasized. His use of the adverb *μόνον*, for instance, in the creed that he sent to Alexander, to qualify the mode of existence of the Father—*ἓνα θεόν, μόνον ἀγέννητον, μόνον αἰδίον, μόνον ἄναρχον, μόνον ἀληθινόν, μόνον ἀθανασίαν ἔχοντα, μόνον σοφόν, μόνον αγαθόν, μόνον δυνάστην*²⁵—unequivocally stresses this point. In fact, the theological crisis of the fourth-century had been triggered by this crusade of Arius to challenge the teaching of his bishop who openly professed the eternal co-existence of the Father and the Son.²⁶ He wrote to Eusebius of Nicomedia about this, complaining that they were expelled from the city simply because they did not subscribe to what Alexander had publicly preached.

The main complaint of the letter of Arius to the Nicomedian was accordingly Alexander's objection to the former's rejection of the predicate 'unbegotten' to the Son. The Alexandrian heresiarch informed his most influential supporter that he and his allies who shared his theological perspective, contrary to the position of the bishop of Alexandria, maintained that: "The Son is not unbegotten (*οὐκ ἔστιν ἀγήνητος*), nor in any way part of the unbegotten (*οὐδὲ μέρος ἀγεννήτου*) and that He does not derive His sub-

²⁵ A. HAHN, *Bibliothek der Symbole und Glaubensregeln der Alten Kirche* (Breslau: Verlag Von E. Morgenstern, 1897), §186.

²⁶ This is evident in the letter of Arius to Eusebius: "God always, the Son always (*ἀεὶ θεός, ἀεὶ υἱός*): as the Father so the Son (*ἅμα πατήρ, ἅμα υἱός*); the Son co-exists (*συνυπάρχει*) unbegotten with God; He is everlasting (*ἀειγενής*); neither by thought nor by any interval does God precede the Son; always God, always Son; He is begotten of the unbegotten: the Son is of God Himself." (*Ep. ad Eus.*; THEODORET, *HE* I,5,1; GCS NF5,26; NPNF 3,41)

It was not the question of whether the identity of the Son is the same as the Father, which would lead to the opinion that the Son has no personal existence apart from the Father, which triggered the Arian controversy. The said issue came to the fore only later on in the development of the theological crisis, when the theological import of the Asiatic theologians on the dispute became prominent.

sistence from any matter (οὐτε ἐξ ὑποκειμένου τινός).²⁷ How are we to understand this quotation? The three expressions could possibly be understood as parallel statements, each one independent from the other, conveying a complete single thought. But it could also be interpreted in the manner taking the last two expressions as dependent on the first, which functions as the principal clause, so that the affirmation of the negative statement about the Son specified in the first statement results in the two alternatives. If it were held true that the Son is unbegotten then it could only be supported either by positing that He is a part of the unbegotten Father or that He is derived from another subsisting matter. In my opinion, this second reading is the more logical choice, especially as it makes more sense when considered within the context of the whole theology of Arius. In other words, Arius seems to suggest that one would be forced to admit either of these two unacceptable ideas if the belief in a Son with no beginning is postulated.

Accordingly, that the Son is unbegotten because He is part of the unbegotten Father could not be received as orthodox because it compromises the simplicity of the Father, making him divisible. Arius intimated this point in his letter to Alexander in connection with his expressed opposition to the Manichean's materialist view of the origin of the Son. Similarly, Eusebius of Nicomedia echoed the same concern when, at the Council of Nicaea, he made public his opposition to the theology espoused by Alexander and colleagues, contending that if they were to call the Son uncreated or unbegotten, then they would fall in the error of saying that he was *homoousios* with the Father.²⁸ The argument of the bishop of Nicomedia runs as follows: there is only one way for the Son to be naturally of the same unbegotten nature, that is, *homoousios* to the Father, if a being of unbegotten nature could be allowed to share a part of his being, in the sense of materially giving out a portion of itself. There seems to be a sort of correlation here between the terms ὁμοούσιος and unbegotten. Such correlation was insinuated by the Arian redactor of the *Blasphemies* when he wrote about the Son: "For he is not equal (οὐδὲ ἴσος), no, nor one in essence (οὐδὲ ὁμοούσιος)

²⁷ ARIUS, *Ep.ad Eus.* (THEODORET, *HE* I,5,3; GCS NF5,26; NPNF 3,41).

²⁸ AMBROSE, *De fide* III,15,125 (CSEL 78,151).

with him.”²⁹ Although the statement speaks of ὅμοος and not unbegotten, still the conclusion is warranted because in the Arian scheme the concept of equality with the Father is equivalent to the idea of being unbegotten.

The second alternative that insists on the notion that the Son is not unbegotten because his subsistence is not derived ‘from any matter’ should be understood within the context of the long-standing cosmological view that postulates the eternal co-existence of matter side by side with the divine. Within this cosmological framework, the notion of eternal generation of the Son could still be sustained even if recourse to the ‘from *ousia* of the Father’ qualification is abandoned. This is because the subsisting matter from which the existence of the Son could be derived is believed to be an eternal presence as well. But, Arius did not adhere to this type of cosmology. Hence, he denied the second alternative as well because for him there is only one eternal principle, God. It thus explains the background of Arius’s notorious declaration that the Son was generated ‘out of nothing’ (ἐκ οὐκ ὄντων). If the Son was not unbegotten because it cannot be sustained that he was from the *ousia* of the Father, and if outside God there exists no other principle, then there is only one logical conclusion as regards the source of the generation of the Son. He comes from nothing.

It was then imperative to affirm that the Father precedes the Son if only to escape the above unacceptable implications. Athanasius could not have been more accurate in the portion of his summary of the *Thalia* when he documented Arius saying: “‘The Son was not always.’ [...] ‘Once he was not’, and ‘He was not before His origination’, but He as others ‘had an origin of creation.’”³⁰ Clearly, this is in direct opposition to the avowed belief of Alexander that “Father always, Son always.”³¹ Arius refused to admit the tenet, well received in the Alexandrian circle, that it is constitutive of the Father to beget the Son. Instead, he viewed the generation of the Son as contingent to the will of the Father. It allowed him to identify a moment

²⁹ ARIUS, *Thalia* (ATHANASIUS, *De syn.* 15,3; H.G. Opitz, *Athanasius Werke II*, 242; NPNF 4,457).

³⁰ ATHANASIUS, *Orat.con.Arian.* I.5,3 (NPNF 4,308-309).

³¹ Cf. ARIUS, *Ep.ad Eus.* (THEODORET, *HE* I,5,1; NPNF 3,41).

when God subsisted alone without the Son, a moment before God had decided to will to generate the Son. However, he also declared that even in that moment when the Father was alone to Himself, the Father was already God: “Though the Son was not, the Father was God.”³² The important point that he was trying to emphasize is purposely clear: the Father is absolutely God independent of the Son.

While it is true that Arius did insist on the exclusive transcendence of the Father on the one hand, and the Son being of a different essence from the Father who created him on the other, he did not, however, just number the Son as one of the creatures. This is a salient theme of the *Blasphemies* as reproduced in *De synodis*. Although the Son is of different essence from the Father because he is created like the rest, he is, nonetheless, above other creatures because of the privileges bestowed on Him by the Father. It is likely that the Arian redactor of the *Blasphemies* was reacting to the distorted view of Arius’s teaching on the Son represented in the summary of Athanasius. The excerpt of *Thalia* found in the *Orationes contra Arianos* promotes the Son as a creature without qualification with its repeated stress on the adverb “as others” and “with the others,” giving the notion that the Son is just like other creatures.³³

How did Arius understand the generation of the Son? Everyone in the fourth-century agreed that the Father has begotten the Son, but the understanding of the nature of the Son’s generation varied. In his letter to Alexander, Arius rejected the idea of those who denied the real personal existence of the Son, specifying that the Son was “generated not in semblance but in truth” (γεννήσαντα δὲ οὐ δοκήσει, ἀλλὰ ἀληθεῖα).³⁴ He also distanced himself from the four heretical theories—the positions of Valentinus, Mani, Sabellius, and Hierakas—about the Son’s origin from the Father. According to Arius, Valentinus spoke of the Son as an emanation (προβολή), and Mani saw the Son as a part of the Father, being one in essence with Him (μέρος

³² ARIUS, *Thalia* (ATHANASIUS, *De syn.* 15,3; NPNF 4,457).

³³ ATHANASIUS, *Orat.con.Arian.* I,5-6. (NPNF 4,308-309).

³⁴ ARIUS, *Ep.ad Alex.Alex.* (HAHN, *Bibliothek*, §186; NPNF 4,458).

ὁμοούσιον τοῦ πατρός).³⁵ Sabellius, on the other hand, was in error for thinking that the Son was also the Father (ὕιοπάτηρ), and Hierakas for teaching that the generation of the Son could be compared to “one torch from another (λύχνον ἀπὸ λύχνου), or as a lamp divided into two (λαμπάδα εἰς δύο).”³⁶

In *Blasphemies* Arius stated categorically that the Father begot the Son by adoption: “The Unbegun made the Son the beginning of the things originated; and advanced Him as a Son to himself by adoption (ἀρχὴν τὸν υἱὸν ἔθηκε τῶν γενητῶν ὁ ἀναρχος καὶ ἤνεγκεν εἰς ἑαυτῷ τόνδε τεκνοποιήσας).”³⁷ However, the Son’s adoption is viewed as adoption of a special kind. It can be discerned by taking notice, in the quoted text, of the significance of the reflexive εἰς ἑαυτῷ that qualifies the act through which the Son was made to exist. Since, according to Arius, all are made into sons of God by adoption, the use of the reflexive here makes the adoption of the Son distinctive from that of the rest of mankind. The Father has willed to create a special kind of relationship between himself and the Son. This special relationship is already hinted at in the preceding statement as it conveys that the Son was appointed by the Father to be the beginning of all things created. It is true that the Son has a beginning like the rest of creatures, but his origin, which took place before time existed, was caused directly and exclusively by the Father, while the origin of the rest of the things created was mediated through the agency of the Son.

The *Blasphemies* makes explicit Arius’s insistence on the special relationship between the Father and the Son, drawing heavily on the conviction that it is only through the mediation of the Son that knowledge of the Father is conveyed to human beings: “Ingenerate we call Him, because of

³⁵ It is important to observe that ὁμοούσιος in this particular context takes a materialist meaning, not the Sabellian sense that the later enemies of Nicea gave it. It will be shown in the subsequent section that the early objection raised against ὁμοούσιος concerns its materialist connotation as understood within the Manichaean circle. The Sabellian reading came later in the development of the Nicene discourse.

³⁶ ARIUS, *Ep.ad Alex.Alex.* (HAHN, *Bibliothek*, §186; NPNF 4,458).

³⁷ ARIUS, *Thalia* (ATHANASIUS, *De syn.* 15,3; H.G. Opitz, *Athanasius Werke II*, 242; NPNF 4,457).

Him who is generate by nature. We praise Him as without beginning because of Him who has beginning. And adore Him as everlasting, because of Him who in time has come to be.”³⁸ Though the Father is uniquely different in substance from the beings that He created, He is not unreachable to them because He gracefully reveals Himself to them through the mediation of the Son. The Son can mediate knowledge of the Father because of a close-knit relationship that He had with the Father. One scholar commenting on the quoted passage even goes to the point of deriving from it a sense of unity between them: “The predicates of God can only be predicated (make only sense) with reference to the Son. In this oblique way Arius can articulate the unity between Father and Son.”³⁹

But Arius also explicitly affirmed in the same work that the Father is invisible to all creatures including the Son. If so, how is it possible for the Son to mediate knowledge of the Father? The same document claims: “I will say it expressly, how by the Son is seen the Invisible; by that power by which God sees, and in his own measure, the Son endures to see the Father as is lawful.”⁴⁰ It was then through the Father’s power of seeing Himself that the Son can perceive the revelation of who the Father is. The Son is not capable of knowing the Father directly. The knowledge about the Father that He obtains is not the product of his own vision of the Father, but rather the revelation resulting from the act of the Father knowing Himself. In this way, the preeminence of the Father over the Son is safeguarded, for it is not right that the Son should, by himself, obtain knowledge of the Father who created Him.⁴¹ In addition to this, it is asserted that the knowledge of the Father that the Son receives is only of partial inadequacy. The reason is that

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See W. LOHR, “Arius Reconsidered, Part 2”, in *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 9 (2005), 137.

⁴⁰ Cf. ARIUS, *Thalia* (ATHANASIUS, *De syn.* 15.3; NPNF 4,457).

⁴¹ The Arian redactor outlines the same thought in a rhetorical question: “What argument then allows, the He who is from the Father should know His own parent by comprehension?” And then he continues to give the reason, “For it is plain that for that which hath a beginning to conceive how the Unbegun is, or grasp the idea, is not possible.” *Thalia* (ATHANASIUS, *De syn.* 15.3).

even if the Father's vision of Himself is comprehensive, the reception of its revelation by the Son is still commensurate to the capacity by which the Son can absorb and comprehend it.⁴²

Moreover, one aspect of Arius's doctrine that received much criticism was his alleged reference to the two Wisdoms of God. Such, however, is a misreading of the text of Arius provided in the slanted summary of Athanasius. In the Arian text reported by Athanasius, there are two wisdoms of God that exist independent of each other, one 'co-existent' with God in eternity from which originated, by partaking of it, the second wisdom, the Son.⁴³ But the proper Wisdom (σοφία) of God being referred to by Arius which brought into being the Son through which the Son is called also Wisdom (σοφία) and Word (λόγος) pertains to the impersonal divine quality of the Father. Arius did not teach two Wisdoms of the Father personally subsisting separately from each other, but rather only one Wisdom proper to the Father in which the Son participates, and by means of which the Son is likewise called Wisdom (σοφία). Simply put, the Father shares with the Son certain divine attributes, one of them is σοφία. The Son is allowed by the grace of the Father to participate in a most eminent way in his divine status, thereby the Son becomes the image of the Father.

Even if Arius permitted the idea that the Son participates in the divinity of the Father, still he did not compromise the supremacy of the Father. He established this opinion most clearly in his missive to Alexander when he qualified that the idea of the Son sharing in the glory of the Father should be understood in the sense that by giving "the Son the inheritance of all things, the Father did not deprive Himself of what He has ingenerately in

⁴² This interpretation is in line with the reading of Williams who, in his book, opines: "The Son sees the Father according to the *dunamis* of the Father's own self-perception; his intellective activity is a multiple and determinate image of the Father's simple vision. (...) Arius's point seems to be that, although the Father is in essence incomprehensible to all beings outside his own, the power of his own self-contemplation generates the possibility of a partial or analogical knowledge of him" (*Arius*, 212).

⁴³ Cf. ATHANASIUS, *Orat.con.Arian.* I,5,5 (NPNF 4,309); "Accordingly, he says, that there are two wisdoms, first, the attribute co-existent with God, and next, that in this wisdom the Son was originated, and was only named Wisdom and Word as partaking of it."

Himself, for He is the fountain of all things.”⁴⁴ The Son received by grace from God “being, and glories, and life and all things,” as they are “delivered unto Him, in such sense is God His origin.”⁴⁵ In other words, the Son has them derivatively from the good graces of the Father, who, on the other hand, owns them essentially in himself. To use the expression of Arius himself, “He has nothing proper to God in proper subsistence (καθ’ ὑποστάσιν ἰδιότητος).”⁴⁶ The Son possesses the attributes of God not in the real sense of property, owning them as essential to his being, but rather as received endowments from the benevolent will of the Father who willingly and gratuitously shared them.

The central controlling principle in the theology of Arius is his belief in the absolute transcendence of the Father and the incommunicability of his divine essence. All the other data of faith, that of the Son included, were interpreted with this doctrine in mind. The emphasis on the absolute singularity of the Father allowed Arius to place the Son on the side of the creatures because the Son, argued Arius, has beginning like the rest. But, as we have already established, He was also careful enough to stress the distinctive position the Son enjoys from the rest of the creatures, a distinction manifested in the special relationship the Father has forged with Him.

The council of Nicaea and the condemnation of Arius

Originally set in Ancyra, the place of the council was transferred to Nicaea, because of its accessibility and its good weather. But the real reason might have been because it was closer to the imperial residence and the emperor wanted to closely monitor its proceedings. The emperor, having witnessed the divisive and violent result of the Donatian schism in the Church of Africa, wanted to attend the council, as far as his circumstances would allow

⁴⁴ ARIUS, *Ep.ad Alex.Alex.* (CPG 2026; Athanasius, *De syn.* 16,3; H.G. Opitz, *Athanasius Werke II*, 244; NPNF 4,458).

⁴⁵ ARIUS, *Ep.ad Alex.Alex.* (NPNF 4,458).

⁴⁶ ARIUS, *Thalia* (ATHANASIUS, *De syn.* 15,3; H.G. Opitz, *Athanasius Werke II*, 242; NPNF 4,457).

him, to closely follow its development and to exert some control in its decision making, all for the purpose of maintaining the unity and peace in the empire.⁴⁷ There were approximately 270 bishops coming from the different bishoprics all over the empire, who participated in the council. It was predominantly an eastern council.⁴⁸ A meager number of the bishops from the West were also present. The reason for the small number of western participants was most probably because, at that time, the Arian question was still confined within the boundary of the eastern part of the empire and many westerners considered it not a matter of concern, thus felt no urgency to take part in the said assembly of bishops.⁴⁹

1. The proceedings of Nicea

The council commenced in June 325. There was no surviving record of the detailed acts of the council except for the creed and the canons that resulted from it. However, there are some bits of information from several individuals who described some details of its proceedings from which one can attempt to make, although incomplete, nonetheless, an informative construct of what took place in the council.

Eusebius of Caesarea reported a speech of Constantine wherein the sovereign outlined in a straightforward fashion the objective he wanted the council to achieve – to “see [the Church leaders] not only assembled, but all united in a common harmony of sentiment.”⁵⁰ The emperor must have delivered it as his opening address to the participants. It must be noted that Constantine was not concerned so much with the subtleties of the terminologies and the intricacies of the conflicting theologies as with his desire to make the different parties agree on the question of doctrine. Moreover, it is

⁴⁷ R.P.C. HANSON, *Search*, 156

⁴⁸ M. SIMONETTI, *Crisi*, 70. Except from Ossius of Cordova, the representative of the emperor who served as the president of the council, and the two representatives of Pope Sylvester, the presbyters Victor and Vicentius, as well as Nicasius of Gaul, Marcus of Calabria and Domnus of Pannonia, there were no other Westerners who participated in the council.

⁴⁹ R.P.C. HANSON, *Search*, 156.

⁵⁰ EUSEBIUS, *Vita Cons.* III,12,1 (NPNF 1,523).

not difficult to explain the pro-Nicene stance of Constantine since his ecclesiastical adviser, Ossius of Cordova, had already been persuaded months before it into endorsing the theology of Alexander. The supporters of Arius were then on the defensive. In fact, three of their bishops who came to the council, one of whom was Eusebius of Caesarea, were provisionally excommunicated in Antioch. As per practice, excommunicated bishops were deprived of the right to participate in the deliberation of ecclesiastical councils, making the investigation of the credentials of participants at the commencement of the conference imperative. It is within this context that the declaration of faith presented by Eusebius of Caesarea in the presence of the emperor and the bishops, which won from the audience universal approval and which he included in his epistle to his diocese, should be viewed.⁵¹

A literal reading of the epistle implies that Eusebius's production of the local creed of his diocese was part of the process that led to the drafting of the ecumenical creed, and that Constantine himself introduced the controversial word *ὁμοούσιος* and was even in control of the theological discussion.⁵² One factor that makes this portrayal doubtful is the key role it concedes to the emperor, portraying him as the prime mover of the theological discussion and the source of the sophisticated theological concept that subsequently generated in the succeeding years prolonged debate among the Church leaders. But it is implausible for the emperor, a recent convert to Christianity and not a seasoned theologian for that matter, to have introduced the term *ὁμοούσιος*. That the emperor was presented to be on top of the situation, showcasing his advanced theological knowledge, engaging the bi-

⁵¹ EUSEBIUS, *Ep.ad eccle.Caes.* (SOCRATES, *HE* I,8; NPNF 2,10-12; THEODORET, *HE* I,12; NPNF 3,49-51).

⁵² This reading is supported by the theory that maintains the dependence of the creed of Nicaea on the local baptismal creed produced by Eusebius. According to this view the creed of Nicaea was a modified version of the baptismal creed of Caesarea deliberately spiced up with anti-Arian statements (H.M. GWATKIN, *Studies in Arianism*, Michigan: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005, 40-44; S. PARVIS, *Marcellus of Ancyra and the Lost Years of the Arian Controversy 325-345* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 85-91). But Kelly has already credibly disproved such hypothesis (See J.N.D. KELLY, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd Edition (London: Continuum, 2008), 217-220, 227-230).

shops in theological discussion and clarifying their doubts, especially in connection with the term ὁμοούσιος, was consistent with Eusebius's program to magnify the character and achievements of the emperor. We see this Eusebian project full blown in his work *Vita Constantini*. However, the contention that the emperor insisted on its inclusion in the creed could be sustained, if interpreted as the support the emperor had shown, having been convinced of its acceptance by the bishops present, after such had been introduced and discussed in the plenary.

There is another Eusebius, mentioned in the narrative of Eustathius, which was preserved in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Theodoret, who, accordingly, at the early stage of the proceedings, presented in the plenary a formulary of faith which "contained undisguised evidence of his blasphemy" and received a great outcry of disapproval from the audience resulting in the subsequent embarrassment of its author. The copy of the said formulary of faith was torn into pieces and the party of Eusebius was convicted of heresy.⁵³ An independent witness from Ambrose of Milan describes a similar incident and identifies the bishop involved as the pontiff of Nicomedia. The bishop of Milan related that Eusebius of Nicomedia read a letter to the assembly through which he strongly opposed the term *homooousios* as it implied for him two uncreated principle: "If, he (Eusebius) said, we do indeed call the son of God uncreated (*increatum*) as well, we are on the way to confessing that he is *homooousios* with the Father."⁵⁴ The quotation must have been lifted from the same letter alluded to in the narrative of Eustathius which accordingly the assembly tore into pieces. Ambrose similarly recounted that the anti-Arian bishops decided to include *homooousios* in the creed because they noticed that the alliance that sustained the cause of Arius showed great disapproval of its use. The narrative of Athanasius corroborates this.

⁵³ THEODORET, *HE* I,7 (NPNF 3,44): It is probable that this Eusebius together with the other bishops associated to him jointly drafted the document thus representing their common teaching, but it is likewise probable that he alone formulated it and the other bishops subsequently subscribed to its doctrine. Either prospect would justify Eustathius deducing from it the condemnation of the party of Eusebius.

⁵⁴ AMBROSE, *De fide* III,I,15,125 (CSEL 78,151).

Athanasius narrated that the Arians were dodging all arguments the fathers put forward with their deceitfulness, hence the term ὁμοούσιος was brought into the discussion to negate the blasphemous opinion of the Arians. But this narrative comes after noting that the phrase ‘from the essence of the Father’ was introduced to specify the meaning of the scriptural phrase ‘from God’ when applied to the Son. He recalled that during the proceedings, the anti-Arian bishops presented several biblical declarations describing the nature of the relationship between the Father and the Son, which the Arians gladly welcomed without much objection, inasmuch as they had their own way of making them suit their understanding. The adherents of the view of Arius, for instance, could concede to the idea that the Son is ‘from God’ because they claimed that the Scriptures also spoke of human beings and other things as originating ‘from God.’⁵⁵ Realizing the strategy of the pro-Arian party and the need for an exclusive term to define the relationship of the Son to the Father, the anti-Arian bishops resolved to accept ὁμοούσιος to reinforce the sense stipulated by the phrase ‘from the essence of the Father,’ a term which although bearing an orthodox meaning was also prone to misinterpretation given its complicated history.

In short, from the available evidence at our disposal, it seems that the council of Nicaea commenced with the speech of the emperor through which he expressed that he wanted the bishops to resolve their differences. Then, early in the council, Eusebius of Caesarea submitted a confession of faith that was received with positive appraisal, most likely for the purpose of rehabilitation, as he was temporarily deposed at Antioch. We have no knowledge about the details of the other procedures, but documentary evidence ascertains that during the drafting of the creed Eusebius of Nicomedia boldly read a letter in the presence of the bishops, representing his party’s theological view perhaps with the hope of soliciting the support of those who were still undecided about the issue. Unfortunately for him, this tactic did not work as his doctrine was not received, with its copy torn into pieces, and he, together with his associates, declared as holding heretical

⁵⁵ ATHANASIUS, *De decr.* 19,1-2 (NPNF 4,162).

view. Then the creed of Nicaea was drafted, incorporating in it the word ὁμοούσιος as deterrence to the pro-Arian party who was discovered to loath its usage, and submitted to the assembly for subscription.

2. The anti-Arian theology of the Creed of Nicaea

Except for a few dissenting voices,⁵⁶ it is now a widely recognized theory that the Nicene formula was based on a local Syro-Palestinian creed, on which is based also the creed of Eusebius of Caesarea. As J.N.D. Kelly points out, without the inserted anti-Arian sentiments, the creedal formula of Nicaea is in substance similar to the confession of faith recited in eastern churches,⁵⁷ which expresses a fundamental belief in the distinction of the persons in the Trinity: “We believe in one God [...] in one Lord Jesus Christ [...] in the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁸ But what makes the Nicene Creed unique is the insertion of anti-Arian statements and the presence of anathemas in the end. After all, the assembly that produced it was convoked precisely to address this perceived problem in the Church. Understanding the significance of Nicaea then requires the analysis of these anti-Arian statements.

In standard patristic manuals, the term μονογενής (only-begotten) in the creed of Nicaea is never considered as advocating anti-Arian sentiment. Many scholars have overlooked for a long time the theological import this expression contributes to the Arian struggle. For example, J.N.D. Kelly passes μονογενής over into silence, justifying his prerogative thus: “it was accepted by all parties in the Arian quarrel and no special dogmatic significance was read into it.”⁵⁹ While it is true that the Arians did use the term μονογενής in theological discourse, the function and the significance that they ascribed to it were, however, entirely different from its meaning given in the creed of Nicaea.

⁵⁶ S. PARVIS, for instance, still maintains the traditional belief that it was derived from the creed of Eusebius of Caesarea. See his work *Marcellus*, 83-91.

⁵⁷ See J.N.D. KELLY, *Creeeds*, 182-188 for the collated texts of the different eastern creeds.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

The creed of Arius, contained in his letter to Alexander, reads: “We acknowledge One God [...] who begat an Only-begotten Son before eternal times (Οἶδαμεν ἓνα θεόν [...] γεννήσαντα υἱὸν μονογενῆ πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων).”⁶⁰ Bearing in mind that for Arius there is no distinction between the ‘act of begetting’ (γένεσις) and ‘creation’ (γένεσις),⁶¹ it becomes manifest that μονογενής in his thought has the connotation of ‘unique from the rest of created beings.’ To paraphrase his confession: before the existence of time, the one God the Father had begotten the Son, *unique* from all the other created sons of God because, as the letter continues, “being begotten apart from time before all things, [He] alone was made to subsist by the Father.”⁶² Hence, in the Arian system, the expression μονογενής is understood in the context of a ‘kind’ category, more particularly indicating the notion of “the only one of its kind,”⁶³ or, in the words of Arius, “not just one of the creatures” (οὐχ ὡς ἓν τῶν κτισμάτων).⁶⁴

An important study of O. Skarsaune⁶⁵ on the creed of Nicaea purposely proves the contention that the framers of the confession of the First Ecumenical Council have assigned a specific dogmatic significance to the term μονογενής. His analysis of the first lines of the confession of Nicaea referring to the Son in comparison with the corresponding parallel lines found in the different eastern creeds, namely, the creeds of Caesarea, Anti-

⁶⁰ A. HAHN, *Bibliothek*, §186.

⁶¹ This is obvious in this letter of Arius to Eusebius of Nicomedia (Theodoret *HE*, I,5,4; GCS NF5,27; NPNF 3,41): “... [B]efore He was begotten (γεννεθῆ), or created (κτισθῆ), or purposed (ὀρισθῆ), or established (θεμελιωθῆ), He was not.” For Arius γεννεθῆ is σπινονψμους το κτισθῆ. Such connection is further established in the same letter when he writes: κτίσμα τοῦ θεοῦ τέλειον ἀλλ’οὐχ ὡς ἓν τῶν κτισμάτων, γέννημα ἀλλ’οὐχ ὡς ἓν τῶν γεγεννημένων; Also when Eusebius of Nicomedia writes to Paulinus of Tyre the same correlation of meaning between the act of begetting and the act of creation is observed: “the Son was created (κτιστόν), established (θεμελιώτον) and begotten (γεννητόν) in the same substance and in the same immutable and inexpressible nature as the Maker.”

⁶² A. HAHN, *Bibliothek*, §186.

⁶³ O. SKARSAUNE, “A neglected detail in the Creed of Nicaea (325)”, in *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 (1987), 44.

⁶⁴ A. HAHN, *Bibliothek*, §186.

⁶⁵ O. SKARSAUNE, *Neglected*, 44. My analysis in this section relies largely on this study.

och, Mopsuestia, Jerusalem, and the Apostolical Constitutions⁶⁶ demonstrates this conscious attempt among its authors to give a particular sense to the word μονογενής.

In all the creeds mentioned with which Nicaea is compared, the word μονογενής bears the function of an attribute to the word Son (υἱός), which is in turn qualified by the phrase τὸν πρωτότοκον πάσης κτίσεως, thereby allowing the possible reading of the Son as the first among those created by God. Meanwhile the participle ‘begotten’ (γεννηθείς) is specified with the expression ‘of the Father’ (ἐκ τοῦ πατρός). I shall cite here, in the original Greek language, the text of the creed of Caesarea, the same creed that Eusebius presumably offered at Nicea as a proof of his orthodoxy, as representative of the traditional eastern creeds.

Καὶ εἰς ἓνα κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, τὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ λόγον [...] υἱὸν
μονογενῆ, πρωτότοκον πάσης κτίσεως, πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων ἐκ τοῦ
πατρὸς γεγεννημένον ...⁶⁷

What needs to be made explicitly evident here is that in the version of the Nicene Creed, given below, the concept μονογενής has been dissociated from its usual coupling with υἱός. Instead it is calculatingly placed as an explanatory attribute to the clause γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ πατρός:

Πιστεύομεν ... καὶ εἰς ἓνα κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ,
γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς μονογενῆ ...⁶⁸

The transposition of the word μονογενής from its usual pairing with υἱός to it becoming a descriptive precision of the phrase γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ πατρός suggests a new special meaning imputed to it by its drafters. What is this new meaning of μονογενής that Nicaea was proposing then? I shall return to this issue shortly.

⁶⁶ For a tabulated presentation of the mentioned creeds see J.N.D. KELLY, *Creeds*, 181-189.

⁶⁷ “And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Logos of God [...], Son only-begotten, first begotten of all creation, begotten before all the ages from the Father.” (Ibid., 182). Emphases are mine for purpose of discussion.

⁶⁸ “We believe [...] in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only begotten.” (Ibid., 182). Emphasis on the original text is mine.

On the other hand, Arius deliberately left out of his confession of faith the phrase ἐκ τοῦ πατρός, not following the standard formula which utilizes it as a precision of γεννηθείς (see the above creed of Caesarea). The reason for this was to keep at bay specifically the idea of natural generation. In the thought of Arius, one danger that might spring from keeping the traditional formula is the implication of the natural generation of the Son, which in turn might lead to the idea that the Son is ingenerate like the Father.⁶⁹ This concern was articulated further in his confession asserting that the Son being from God meant nothing other than that he has origin from the Father: “So far then as from God (παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ) He has being, and glories, and life, and all things are delivered unto Him, in such sense is God His origin (ἀρχὴ αὐτοῦ ἐστὶν θεοῦ).”⁷⁰ As a countercheck to the Arian doctrine, it can be stipulated that the term μονογενής as employed at Nicaea directly contradicts the assumed meaning provided for in the confession of faith of Arius. If in the mind of Arius μονογενής is closely identified with the concept of creation (γένεσις), in Nicaea μονογενής is associated with the concept of generation (γένεσις).

Such is the insight that one gets when one takes μονογενής in conjunction with the clause that immediately comes after it, ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρός. I am inclined to see in this clause a further precision of what μονογενής means in reference to γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ πατρός. This reading is actually supported by the fact that the clause ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρός is introduced by an explanatory conjunction τοῦτ’ ἐστίν, which literally means ‘that is.’ Hence the whole segment γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ πατρός μονογενῆ, τοῦτέστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρός would yield the sense that the Son of God, who is begotten from the Father, is in fact, the ‘only-begotten,’ that is, ‘He is the only one begotten from the Father,’ in contradistinction to other beings who are said to be ‘from the Father.’ He is called ‘only-begotten’ because He is the only one, and there is no other, who is begotten from the

⁶⁹ We have already seen this concern of Arius when we dealt with his theology particularly in his letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia where he specifically declared that the quality “unbegotten” must not be predicated to the Son.

⁷⁰ A. HAHN, *Bibliothek* §186.

being of the Father. Here the axiom *τουτέστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς* establishes decisively the reason why the Son was specified *μονογενής*, understood in the sense of the only naturally begotten Son of God the Father.

The Nicene bishops were not contented with describing the Son as ‘begotten from the Father’ (*γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς*), because it is still too general a concept. In fact, the Arians, according to Athanasius, could very well accept this expression in that they had a way of interpreting it to accommodate their own doctrine. They understood *ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς* in the given expression as referring to the will of the Father, thus still maintaining their fundamental belief that the Son is of different essence from the Father. Even the term *μονογενής*, which renders the sense of natural generation to the procession of the Son from the Father, has to be further reinforced. It is in this context, acknowledging the shrewdness of the pro-Arian bishops to twist the interpretation of texts to sustain their view, that they integrated *ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς* as a further specification of *γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς*. With it incorporated in the creed, it would now be very difficult for the defenders of Arius to impose on it their own meaning.

The phrase *ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς*, in actuality, occupied a prominent role in the early part of the Arian debate. It was this point that consumed much of the energy of both sides, with one party ardently defending its use and the compatibility of its meaning with the biblical pronouncements about the Son, and the other taking the opposite position preferring the simpler formula *ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς* inasmuch as it is scriptural and they could read into it their preferred doctrine about the Son. The repulsion of the Arians⁷¹ to the formula *ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς* had as its groundwork the thought of Origen, who repudiated it for implying the generation of the Son in the manner

⁷¹ Arius pointed out to Eusebius of Nicomedia that his refusal to concede to the teaching that perceives the Son as a part of the Father implied by the said phrase was the cause for which he and his supporters were banished from Alexandria (*Ep.ad Eus.*; THEODORET, *HE*, I, 5, 4; NPNF 3; 41). Likewise, the Arian bishop of Nicomedia declared that he could not accept the opinion that the Son “had been from Him or of Him, as a portion of Him (*μέρος αὐτοῦ*), or by an emanation of His substance (*ἀπορρίας τῆς οὐσίας*)” because it would run against their basic notion that the Son was created and established like the rest of the creatures (*Ep.ad Paul.*; THEODORET, *HE* I, 6, 5; GCS NF 5, 28; NPNF 3, 42).

of human birth, downgrading the divine beings to the world of material realities, and suggesting that the Father through the process of generation has been divided or deprived of something.⁷² In the Arian view the formula ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς would lead to another equally repulsive idea: the teaching of the co-existence of the Son and the Father from all eternity, interpreted by them as equivalent to positing two ingenerate principles.

The passage ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς opens to the belief that the Father and the Son share the same substance, which would consequently posit the idea of two ingenerate principles. For the Arians, such is an unacceptable conclusion. In the same letter of Arius referred to above, he firmly held his ground against the teaching of his bishop who preached the eternal generation of the Son:

He has driven us out of the city as atheists, because we do not concur in what he publicly preaches, namely, God always, the Son always; as the Father so the Son; the Son co-exists unbegotten with God; He is everlasting; neither by thought nor by any interval does God precede the Son; always God, always Son; he is begotten of the unbegotten: the Son is of God Himself.⁷³

This assumed connection between the assertion of ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς and the idea of the existence of two ingenerate principles, which the partisans of Arius eschewed, is more explicit in the letter of Eusebius of Nicomedia to Paulinus, written in support of Arius:

But we affirm that the unbegotten is one (ἐν μὲν τὸ ἀγέννητον), and one also that which exists in truth by Him, yet was not made out of His substance (οὐκ ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας αὐτοῦ γεγονός), and does not at all participate in the nature of the unbegotten (τῆς φύσεως τῆς ἀγεννήτου μὴ μετέχον) or being from His own substance (ὄν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας αὐτοῦ).⁷⁴

⁷² ORIGEN, *In Ioh.* 20,157-8: "These must consequently say that the Son has been begotten of the Father's essence, as one might understand this also in the case of those who are pregnant, and that God is diminished and lacking, as it were, in the essence that he formerly had, when he has begotten the Son. These people must also say, as a consequence, that the Father and the Son are corporeal, and that the Father has been divided."

⁷³ ARIUS, *Ep.ad Eus.* (THEODORET, *HE*, I,5,1; GCS NF5,26; NPNF 3;41).

⁷⁴ EUSEBIUS OF NICOMEDIA, *Ep.ad Paul.* (THEODORET, *HE* I,6,3; GCS NF5,28; NPNF 3,42).

According to the Arian view, the Son could not share the ingenerate principle of the Father because He was not begotten out of the Father's substance. As one may notice here, generation from the substance of the Father is understood by Arius and his supporters in a materialist sense. But it is not the sense provided for by the fathers at Nicaea. The Nicenes apprehended the generation of the Son in terms of spiritual reality. With the assertion that the Son was begotten from the substance of the Father affirmed, the other anti-Arian statements could be effectively avowed. It is because of this fact, for instance, that it can be insisted that the Son is "true God from true God" (Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ) against those who argued that only the Father is the true God.

The Arians relied on their exegesis of Jn.17,3 where Jesus is recounted as uttering the words, "This is the life eternal, that they should know Thee the only true God," as the biblical foundation for their belief in the unique divinity of the God the Father. It is characteristic of the Arians to emphasize the uniqueness and transcendence of the Father such that they were adamant in denying the Son's equality with the Father. This is the case with Arius, in the report of Athanasius, insisting that, "Though [the Son] is called God, yet He is not very God (Θεὸς ἀληθινός), but is God by participation of grace (μετοχῇ χάριτος), He, as others, is God only in name."⁷⁵ Contrary to this Arian view, the point that the council fathers would want to drive at was that "the Son was truly God in whatever sense the Father was God."⁷⁶ After all, He was from the substance of the Father.

Moreover, the phrase "begotten not made" (γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντα) was included to stress another aspect of the doctrine of the Son. If the last statement highlights the sameness in substance of the Father and the Son, this particular clause emphasizes the Son's difference from created beings. As discussed above, the Arian group did not make any distinction between the concept of generation and creation, arguing that, in Scriptures, the word begotten is also applied to beings of substance different from God,

⁷⁵ ATHANASIUS, *Orat.contra.Arian.I.6,1* (K. Metzler, *Athanasius Werke I/2,115*; NPNF 4,308).

⁷⁶ J.N.D. KELLY, *Creeds*, 237.

for instance, human beings. With the application of ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς as fitting description of the Son's generation, the exalted status of the Son is emphasized. It ascribes to the Son a reality entirely distinct from the creatures as it makes him share the substance of the Father.

The idea that the ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς and the other anti-Arian pronouncements derived from it are capped by the council Fathers in the famed formula ὁμοούσιος τῷ πατρί (consubstantial with the Father). Just like the formula from which it proceeded, it, too, attracted much criticism from the Arian group. The Arians objected to this term, at least as documented in Arian writings prior to Nicaea, because in their opinion, it implies a materialist conception of God. The letter of Arius to Alexander states that it repeats the error of the Manicheans whose view includes that "the Son was a portion of the Father." At Nicaea the Arians's objection to ὁμοούσιος could be reduced to two points. The first one is that its sense is intimately wedded to material categories. The second proceeds and develops from this first protestation, that is, it leads to the conclusion that the Father and the Son are two unoriginate principles.

Insofar as the majority of the anti-Arian bishops at Nicaea are concerned, by this I mean the bishops who subscribed to the view of Alexander on the issue. The opposition of the Arians to ὁμοούσιος was not that it promoted a Sabellianistic understanding of God, but because of its materialist notion. One can always refer to the defense of the term provided by the Nicene fathers, as reported by Eusebius of Caesarea in his letter to his diocese, to substantiate this contention.⁷⁷ The solitary view of God was never a point of conflict between Arius and Alexander. In fact, Alexander nearly approximated the doctrine of three distinct divine *hypostases* when, interpreting the Johannine verse "I and my Father are one" (Jn 10:30), he repulsed the possible confusion of the Son's existence with the Father, declaring that in saying this the Lord does not represent "the two natures as one" (τὰς τῇ ὑποστάσει δύο φύσεις μίαν εἶναι τὰς).⁷⁸ He did not object to the distinction

⁷⁷ EUSEBIUS, *Ep.ad eccl.Caes.* (THEODORET, *HE* I,12,9ff; NPNF 3,49).

⁷⁸ ALEXANDER, *Ep.ad Alex.Thess.* (THEODORET, *HE* I,4,38; GCS NF5,18; NPNF 3,38).

of the Father and the Son. What was objected to was the inferior status that Arius and his supporters ascribed to the Son. The fathers at Nicaea, by employing the term ὁμοούσιος, wanted to stress the full divinity of the Son, the same divinity that he partakes from the Father who begot him.

Added to the creed are the condemnations of several statements of Arius. The first anathema concerns the idea that insists on the Son having a beginning: “There was when he was not, and, before being born He was not” (ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν, καὶ πρὶν γεννηθῆναι οὐκ ἦν).⁷⁹ The message is to refute the Arian argument that the Son, just like the rest of creation, has a beginning. Another Arian declaration condemned at Nicaea was, “He came to existence out of nothing” (ἐξ οὐκ οντων ἐγένετο).⁸⁰ This censured statement is a logical consequent of the Arian’s rejection of the opinion that the Son was begotten out of the Father’s substance. As they argued, since the Son did not come from the substance of God, then, inasmuch as apart from God nothing else exists, He must have been made out of nothing. Against this, the council would want to reiterate that the Son partakes of the same immutable nature of the Father because He was begotten from the Father’s own *ousia*. The same explanation could be provided for the condemnation of the last two Arian statements: “those who say that the Son of God is of different hypostasis or substance” (ἢ ἐξ ἑτερας ὑποστάσεως ἢ οὐσίας φάσκοντας εἶναι [...] τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ) and the Son is “subject to alteration or change” (ἢ τρεπτὸν ἢ ἀλλιωτὸν).⁸¹

A comment on this condemned Arian statement: “those who say that the Son of God is of different hypostasis or substance” (ἢ ἐξ ἑτερας ὑποστάσεως ἢ οὐσίας φάσκοντας εἶναι [...] τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ). Here, both the terms ὑποστασις and οὐσία are mentioned. The question that should be asked is whether the framers of Nicaea understood these two terms as synonymous. Hanson⁸² thinks that they are not. He constructs his argument on the basis of the evidence that, earlier in the Creed, the word οὐσία has al-

⁷⁹ A. HAHN, *Bibliothek*, §142.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Cf. R.P.C. HANSON, *Search*, 167-168.

ready been employed, but ὑπόστασις is not coupled with it. Moreover, he further claims support that for Origenists—both the defenders of Arius and the protagonists at Nicaea—the word ὑπόστασις is understood as individual subsistence, and so they could not have permitted an expression that would deny the three *hypostases* doctrine that they all firmly upheld. He thus distinguishes two statements from such expression: “this highly equivocal expression meant that Son came from the Father’s ‘Person,’ because it was the Father who begets the Son but also that the Son was not of a different nature or substance from the Father”.⁸³

Contrary to this interpretation of Hanson, I am inclined to favor the more widely accepted reading that the Fathers at Nicaea understood the two expressions as having the same meaning. There was no reason for the council fathers to anathematize the statement that the Son came from another hypostasis other than the Father simply because the Arians did not teach it. In fact, Arius was very plain in affirming that the Son came from the Father, that it was the Father himself who begot the Son and the Father is the source of all powers that the Son has. What Arius was wary about was the interpretation that the Father, being the source of all the Son’s power, might be thought of as deprived of all the things that he had given the Son,⁸⁴ but he never taught that the Son was begotten by *hypostasis* other than the Father.

It is true, however, that the identification of these two terms caused the unsuspecting people to read into them a modalist interpretation of the relationship of the Father and the Son, but not without reason. This is because a few members of the Nicene alliance thought of hypostasis, understood in the sense of individual concrete existence, as the controlling concept, in the light of which the term *ousia* is perceived. However, while we could not deny the presence of some monarchian bishops in the Nicene alliance, we could be certain that it was not their teaching that prompted the majority of bishops to incorporate the term ὁμοούσιος into the final draft of the Nicene Creed, even if the anti-Nicene polemics of post-Nicaea chiefly

⁸³ Cf. R.P.C. HANSON, *Search*, 168.

⁸⁴ See ARIUS, *Ep.ad Alex.Alex.*; ATHANASIUS, *De syn.* 16.

focused on viewing the Creed as if it were a product of a Sabellianist mind. This position of a few members of the Nicene alliance, made known to the later orthodox Nicene authors, has enjoined the latter, not to indulge their opponents's modalist reading of Nicaea, to prefer a simplified version of this anathema retaining only the term *ousia*, just as Athanasius did when he quoted it in his polemical writing (*De decr.*20). Furthermore, it is not entirely true that the Easterners could not accept the ἐξ ἑτερας ὑποστάσεως formula, for, as the Fourth Creed of Antioch 341 reveals, they were rather more uncomfortable with the ἐξ ἑτερας οὐσίας—as it connotes, in their opinion, and this we have already seen, material reality—in that it was omitted from its quotation of this particular Nicene anathema. What can be concluded instead from all of these testimonies is that until this time no fixed meaning has yet been applied to these theological terms—one can still use *hypostasis* to mean individual subsistence or equivalent to *ousia*—and in the said anathema it was employed, I believe, insofar as the orthodox bishops are concerned, as equivalent to *ousia*.

The theology of Nicaea insists on the natural generation of the Son, specifying it more particularly as a generation from the *ousia* of the Father (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς). The assertion of this point is fundamental in that the other anti-Arian statements made by the council are hinged on this. It likewise explains the stubborn resistance of the pro-Arian bishops to its inclusion as description of the generation of the Son. Moreover, that it is the focal doctrine sustaining the other Nicene pronouncements can be substantiated by Eusebius of Caesarea's declaration to the members of his Church at Caesarea. In this document the bishop of Caesarea avowed that he was able to accept ὁμοούσιος because he found acceptable the meaning of the clause "the Son is [...] of the substance of none save the Father," which accordingly bears the sense that the Son of God did not resemble the creatures but rather the Father, who begot Him.⁸⁵ The orthodox meaning of

⁸⁵ Cf. EUSEBIUS, *Ep.ad eccl.Caes.* (THEODORET, *HE* I,12,13; NPNF 3,50): "It was concluded that the expression 'being of one substance with the Father,' implies that the Son of God does not resemble in any one respect, the creatures which He has made; but that to the Father alone, who begat Him, He is in all points perfectly like: for He is of the

ὁμοούσιος, just as the rest of the anti-Arian expressions, is guaranteed by and derived from the appropriate interpretation of “from the substance of the Father,” taken, if I may use the term, in a spiritual and not in a materialist sense as the Arians thought.

Conclusion

The Arian crisis was about the right doctrine of the nature of the Son of God in relation to God the Father. Arius and Alexander represented the contending theological doctrines of God. Their debate provided an opportunity for the other ecclesiastics who were aligned to either theological views to be aware of the opposing position and allowed them to join the fray leading to a dramatic and prolonged theological battle that took more than half of the century to settle. Arius and his likeminded supporters held on to the belief in the unique transcendence of the Father and the incommunicability of his essence, even to the Son. In reaction to this Arian proposition, the Nicene creed stressed the natural generation of the Son with its usage of the expressions such as μονογενής, ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρός, and ὁμοούσιος. The fathers in Nicea confirmed the equality of essence of God the Father and the Son of God, affirming that the Son of God is divine in the same manner that God the Father is understood to be divine. It was established by securing the belief in the natural generation of the Son from the essence of the Father. The essence of God the Father is the identical essence that constituted the reality of the Son of God. For this reason, the Son is regarded as of the same essence as God the Father.

essence and of the substance of none save of the Father. This interpretation having been given of the doctrine, it appeared right to us to assent to it, especially as we were aware that of the ancients some learned and celebrated bishops and writers have used the term *homoousios* with respect to the divinity of the Father and the Son.”